

Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy: A Question of Character

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by **Timothy D. Naegele**

With the passage of time, America's greatest presidents prior to the 21st Century are apt to be viewed as Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. Gone from that list most certainly will be John F. Kennedy. Today, few young Americans even know who he was—or care about him—because less than a handful of his positive accomplishments had any lasting significance.

Reagan will be remembered, while Kennedy may be forgotten. This conclusion will surely offend those Kennedy disciples who are still pushing the myth of Camelot until its last gasp. Like William McKinley, the fact that an assassin cut short Kennedy's life and presidency might be all that Americans recall about him 50 years from now.

It is striking how the death of Reagan last year made one realize how great he was, and how small and inconsequential Kennedy's accomplishments were. Aside from some flowery words—mostly written for him by Theodore Sorenson—and what remains of the once-vibrant Peace Corps, Kennedy's legacy is almost nonexistent today.

Reagan was lucky and blessed to have survived an assassin's bullet only 69 days after he took office on January 20, 1981, and America and the free world are fortunate that he did. More than 40 years after Kennedy's death, the full extent of his life-long medical problems is still being withheld from the American people and conservative scholars; and it is doubtful whether he would have lived to accomplish anything approaching what Reagan achieved.

Kennedy launched this nation into Vietnam; and his secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, was the architect of that lost war and the enormous suffering that it produced. More than 50,000 brave Americans died, and it impaled this nation's honor on the horns of a tragedy that still haunts policy makers and citizens alike.

Even before Vietnam, Kennedy was responsible for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, where Fidel Castro humiliated him completely. This led to more than 40 years of enslavement for the Cuban people. The Cuban Missile Crisis, or Kennedy's confrontation with the Soviet Union, might have given rise to a nuclear winter.

Reagan is remembered for having brought down that “Evil Empire,” as well as the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, and for freeing the people of Eastern Europe. Today, America’s friends in “New Europe” are its partners in NATO and its allies in the EU—as free men, woman and children who are no longer enslaved by communism.

Reagan’s marriage to Nancy was special and they were blessed with love. There was no hiding of mistresses by the Secret Service, which took place during Kennedy’s presidency. His reckless affairs with women were only outdone by his irresponsible and dangerous relationships with mobsters such as Chicago crime boss Sam Giancana.

Reagan was a doer who had style. Kennedy had style; however, the bloom has even gone off that rose. His serial womanizing, relations with Mafioso figures like Giancana—through their sexual liaisons with Judith Campbell Exner, who was used as their go-between—and other serious character flaws marred it.

Reagan was elected and reelected by landslides, while it is doubtful whether Kennedy would have become president in 1960 if the Mob had not helped him in Illinois and West Virginia—and Giancana claimed credit for that. Kennedy was the son of a bootlegger, and the apple does not fall far from the tree.

The discrepancy between Camelot and the man himself has been laid bare; and there is a stark difference between the hype of Kennedy acolytes and the truth. Perhaps the debunking of his myth is similar to what happened to this country after Vietnam. Maybe Kennedy and America’s invincibility before that war both shared a similar fate, and this country’s naiveté somehow ended.

Kennedy was not someone to look up to, much less deify. Many of us came to that conclusion reluctantly, years ago, with a sense of sadness rather than anger. Like the potentate in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” the myth about Kennedy and his feet of clay have become clear for all to see with the passage of time.

In a recent Discovery Channel poll, Reagan was chosen as the “Greatest American,” edging Lincoln by a small margin. When he left office, Reagan had fulfilled his 1980 campaign pledge to restore "the great, confident roar of American progress and growth and optimism." Also, greatness is often achieved in times of war, and Kennedy never won the war with Cuba, much less the Vietnam War that he started, nor did he win the Cold War—which Reagan won, as he implemented the policy of "peace through strength."

Reagan will be remembered as one of America’s greatest presidents and a man of character. Kennedy was a tragic Shakespearean figure who may be forgotten and consigned to the dustheap of history. Perhaps this contrast between Reagan and Kennedy—this question of character that Thomas C. Reeves described in his terrific book about Kennedy—is what separates the men and underscores their differences, and ultimately will define their respective places in history.

Timothy D. Naegele

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tdnaegele.associates@gmail.com

Mr. Naegele was counsel to a U.S. Senate committee, and chief of staff to a senator. He practices law in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles with his firm, Timothy D. Naegele & Associates (www.naegele.com). Also, he served as a Captain in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency at the Pentagon, where he received the Joint Service Commendation Medal. Mr. Naegele is an Independent, and has written extensively over the years, with two articles appearing in the Banking Law Journal and the American Banker earlier this year (see www.naegele.com/whats_new.html#articles). Even though he was not old enough to vote, he watched in the Los Angeles Coliseum as John F. Kennedy delivered his acceptance speech at the Democratic Party's 1960 convention. Initially, he became a Democrat because of Kennedy.

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